1. Summary

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The purpose of the Dungeness River Agricultural Water Users Association Conservation Plan (Conservation Plan), the subject of this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), is to reduce diversion of water by Water Users Association (WUA) member companies and districts from the Dungeness River for irrigation and domestic uses to the minimum practicable. This will increase streamflow in the Dungeness River and will increase the chances of survival of federally listed species of salmonids, including chinook salmon, Hood Canal summer chum, bull trout, and other stocks of concern, such as pink salmon. This is needed to ensure compliance with the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Projects proposed in the Conservation Plan include piping leaky open ditches, combining adjacent canals, building re-regulating reservoirs, and abandoning a canal. Nonproject elements of the plan include a public education program, a drought response plan, improved gaging and measuring systems, and the combination of the seven districts and companies into two entities, one west of and one east of the Dungeness River.

Two alternatives to full implementation of the proposed Conservation Plan include an alternative that selects the most economically efficient projects (Alternative 4) and an alternative that minimizes adverse impacts to important streams and wetlands (Alternative 6).

The most significant area of controversy surrounds the artificial enhancement of shallow aquifer ground water and small-stream flow due to irrigation conveyance system losses. This artificial enhancement has, over the years of irrigation use, increased the shallow aquifer water level. This, in turn, has made more water available for pumping in wells and has expanded natural wetlands and increased natural streamflow levels in small creeks. At the same time, the conveyance losses have required excessive diversion of water from the Dungeness River, especially during low-flow periods. Artificial enhancement of the shallow aquifer ground water (and consequently small streams and wetlands) will continue under Alternative 1 (No Action) and in selected areas under Alternative 6 (Minimized Impact to Small Streams and Wetlands). Excess diversion has adverse impacts on habitat for Dungeness River fish, including those federally listed as well as local critically depressed stocks of other species.

Issues addressed in the EIS are included in two categories:

1. Reduced Dungeness River streamflow due to diversions for irrigation has an impact on fish species.
2. Increased efficiency of irrigation water delivery system will reduce the quantity of tailwater entering small streams and water entering the shallow aquifer in at least some places in the project area and could have an impact on wetlands, creeks, and human uses of the shallow aquifer.

The Conservation Plan is itself a large mitigation plan to minimize the impacts of continued diversion of Dungeness River water. Any direct or indirect use of Dungeness River water to mitigate for impacts to wetlands, creeks, or human uses of the shallow aquifer, including water from the shallow aquifer in possible hydraulic continuity with the river, would reduce the effectiveness of this mitigation plan and could decrease the chances for recovery of salmonid species dependent on the river.

This analysis and EIS are not part of phased review but are partially dependent on the work published in the Conservation Plan, incorporated in this document by reference. Ground water modeling developed in 2003 was used for the impact analysis included in this Final EIS, rather than relying on the previous modeling effort used in the Draft EIS. This Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was issued on November 25, 2003.